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Public hearing held to address the Fort Wingate Land Division Act of 2014

Legislation to support H.R. 3822 to be introduced to Council

CHURCHROCK, N.M.—Last Friday, Council Delegate Edmund Yazzie (Churchrock, Iyanbito, Mariano Lake, Pinedale, Smith Lake, Thoreau) met with constituents from Bááháálí, Churchrock, and Iyanbito chapters during a public hearing to address H.R. 3822, the Fort Wingate Land Division Act of 2014, introduced by U.S. Rep. Ben R. Luján (D-NM) on Jan. 8, 2014.

The Fort Wingate Land Division Act of 2014 seeks to divide approximately 21,000 acres of parceled land between the Navajo Nation and the Zuni Tribe, which was previously used by the military to store ammunition and explosive materials.

Delegate Yazzie, who represents the communities of Churchrock and Iyanbito, said it was critical to hear the concerns of his community members because the proposed land division will have lasting impacts on their land and their families.

In addition, Delegate Yazzie noted that he recently sent a letter to Rep. Luján inviting him to meet with several of the local chapters and said he continues to urge the congressman to do so to address the bill and to answer questions from community members.

Approximately 150 community members attended the public hearing and many shared ancestral stories of Navajo people residing within the disputed land boundaries dating back centuries.

Some expressed concern over the contamination caused by the storage of ammunition and explosive materials for decades and urged the Navajo Nation Council to ensure that proper land restoration is conducted by the federal government prior to the passage of the congressional bill.

“We need to look at the air quality, water quality, and vegetation to make sure the U.S. is not going to place those responsibilities on us to restore,” stated community member Ted Nez.

On July 8, 2013, members of the Fort Wingate Army Depot Task Force met in Washington, D.C. with Reps. Luján (D-N.M.), Steve Pearce (R-N.M.), Don Young (R-Alaska), and Pueblo of Zuni Gov. Arlen Quetawki, Sr. to negotiate and discuss the proposed land settlement.

As a result of the negotiations, the Navajo Nation would receive approximately 10,000 acres and the Zuni Tribe approximately 9,000 acres of the parceled land, with the remaining 2,000 acres to remain under the U.S. Department of Defense due to high levels of contamination in the area.

Throughout the day-long public hearing, numerous community members thanked Delegate Yazzie for bringing the issue to their attention and for listening to their concerns.

The Iyanibito Chapter also held a public hearing on Aug. 25, 2013, in which Delegate Yazzie was joined by Speaker Johnny Naize (Low Mountain, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tachee/Blue Gap, Tselani/Cottonwood) who chairs the Fort Wingate Army Depot Task Force.

During a meeting held on Feb. 14, task force members voted in support of H.R. 3822, along with a directive to introduce legislation to Council in support of the congressional bill.

On Feb. 26, Speaker Naize issued a memo informing members of Council of the task force's support of H.R. 3822 and requested that legislation be drafted to support the land division.

"The best course of action is to seek a resolution of the Council supporting H.R. 3822 and approving the Fort Wingate MOU Task Force's negotiated resolution of this matter," wrote Speaker Naize.

Legislation is expected to be drafted and introduced by next week.

Other Fort Wingate Army Depot Task Force members include Council Delegates Mel R. Begay, Charles Damon II, Edmund Yazzie, Leonard Tsosie, Danny Simpson, and George Apachito.

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